

The Flipside - CNNfn

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U.N. Conference on Human Cloning Re-Ignites Ethical Debate

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KATHLEEN HAYS, CNNfn ANCHOR, THE FLIPSIDE: This is THE FLIPSIDE. I'm Kathleen Hays. Joining me are Greg Clarkin, and JJ Ramberg.

HAYS: Another long-term story but a big story, starting tomorrow in terms of the U.N., human cloning. We are going to have such an interesting debate on stem cell research, stem cell research for cloning versus reproductive purposes. Again the U.N. starting a very important meeting to urge countries of the world, urge the U.S. not to ban it. It's so important supporters say, for finding cures for some very important diseases.

RAMBERG: These will be good guests. They will define for us -- it's so confusing. There's so many issues between what kinds of cloning, and what is a stem cell. So they can define it and then talk to us about both sides of the issue.

CLARKIN: I'm hoping to get clarity out of it. There's so many type of subcategories and subjects that it's all encompassing.

HAYS: It sure is. We'll get both sides of the debate including someone who says we should not do this, we're treading on dangerous ground...

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

HAYS: The debate over human cloning is on stage at the United Nations this week. Tomorrow scientists from around the world will address the U.N. lobbying against the possible international ban on human cloning for research purposes. So, what's at stake on both sides of the issue?

Joining us from Washington, Richard Doerflinger, of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Here in the studio, Bernard Siegel, executive director of the Genetics Policy Institute -- which is hosting tomorrow's U.N. conference. We welcome you both to THE FLIPSIDE.

HAYS: We're going to be really happy that you could both join us for this debate. But with both of you we really want to start by laying out some definition of terms, really what are we talking about? Because for those of us who aren't in this field, it's pretty confusing.

Bernard, I'd really like to start with you. What are you urging the U.N. to do? What aspect of cloning, embryonic research do you think should be approved? Is there any part of it that should be banned? What is on the table? What is it we're talking about that's so controversial?

BERNARD SIEGEL, GENETICS POLICY INSTITUTE: In the United Nations they are considering a ban on reproductive cloning. But it's more than just reproductive cloning. Everyone is against cloning babies. The leading scientists of the world that are going to be at the United Nations tomorrow are all against cloning babies.

But there is also a proposal on the table that would include a ban on therapeutic cloning. Which is a form of stem cell research. More formerly known as somatic cell nuclear cell transfer. Every one of these scientists wants that stem cell research to advance.

CLARKIN: Richard, I see you there scribbling notes as Bernard is speaking. Your take on this?

RICHARD DOERFLINGER, UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS: Well, I think there is a language games being played here. The cloning procedure somatic cell nuclear transfer is exactly the same depending on -- doesn't depend on whether you're making those embryos for research to destroy them in the lab, or put them in a womb and try to make a baby. It's exactly the same cloning procedure.

The South Korean scientists who are the only one so far to have documented a success in doing that procedure at all have publicly said that. That this -- you can't separate these two uses of cloning. The problem, there are two ways of banning cloning.

One is to ban the cloning procedure in humans' altogether. And the other way is to allow the cloning procedure, allow these hundreds of thousands or millions of embryos to be mass produced in laboratories for research. And then somehow try to stop that afterwards and say now we're going to have big brother looking over all these scientists' shoulders and somehow prevent any of them from ever getting into a womb.

In fact, this research cloning is exactly what someone who wants to make babies by cloning would need in order to refine the procedure. And then go ahead and do baby making by cloning.

RAMBERG: I guess that brings up the question then, are we going down a slippery slope? If we allow cloning of one type, are we going down a slope?

SIEGEL: No, we're not. You see at this point we can draw the line. The line is drawn at the uterus. There's not going to be a pregnancy here. There's not going to be a baby cloned. This is a form of stem cell research. If there's any disinformation it's coming from the foes of the research.

Stem cell research is different. Unfortunately cloning is such is sledge hammer term that all you here is human cloning. But you're not hearing the part that therapeutic cloning is a form of stem cell research -- where a patients DNA can be placed in an unfertilized egg and at 150 cells we can take some of those cells that would be stem cells that could turn into any part of a human body.

It's an incredible scientific break through. There's a difference. There are 100 trillion cells in an adult human being. We're talking about cells in a glass dish. Never in a uterus.

HAYS: Viewers I want to remind you before we let Richard respond to that, you can call in with your opinion, with your question. You may find this confusing, hard to keep up with a debate of what's going on here.

Richard before you respond let me just ask Bernard one more question. Because I just want to clarify something. You say my DNA could be placed in an unfertilized egg to create an embryo. So, in other words, this embryo that is produced ends up being somewhat different from the kind of embryo that is produced if you take a man's sperm and woman's egg and put them together? It's a different kind of embryo? Is that it?

SIEGEL: In fact, it is. Scientists such as Rudolph Jaenisch at MIT pointed out that there's no way that what you are creating could turn into a normal human being. That's the point. You can draw the line. So it will not take place. This is a form of stem cell research that could help millions of people.

CLARKIN: Richard, do you see it that way?

DOERFLINGER: Well, no. Mr. Sigel has pointed out the obvious fact that in order to turn into an adult human being embryos have to get bigger and grow a lot more cells. But this is the same embryo that that -- the same embryo that proposed to be destroyed for stem cells is the same embryo that if you put it in a womb may or may not some day make a baby. It may not be a healthy baby. It may be a very sick baby.

But if you destroy that for stem cells there are going to be sick stem cell, too. The latest findings -- Dr. Yenish (ph) knows these findings -- are that stem cells from cloned embryos not only have the genetic abnormalities that people are finding now in all embryonic stem cells -- but they have enormous problems of gene expression that may make them too dangerous for ever putting in human being anyway.

The thing I'm worried about here is the hype that's being put on the therapeutic promise of this. Mr. Siegel has said in his conference materials that if you ban human cloning completely, you are depriving millions of the hope of cures for diseases like Parkinson's and Alzheimer's and diabetes. The scientists who advise him at his conference know that's not true.

Dr. Ian Wilmut who's one of the top cloning experts in the world said in the British medical journal just a few months ago that cloning is quite unnecessary for anything involving the nervous system. Because the nervous system doesn't have much of an immune response. You don't need to make cloned embryos to get genetically matched cells.

He also said cloning is largely irrelevant to diseases like diabetes because if you put those genetically matched cells from a cloned embryo into a diabetic patient, they'll have exactly the same genetic profile that makes the patient's immune system attack his own cells in the first place. This is hype parading as science but it is not objective science.

RAMBERG: Bernard, why don't you respond to that?

SIEGEL: First of all, listen to the scientists tomorrow. The AMA's leading medical organization, scientific organizations are all saying this is incredible promise. It's in its infancy. The research shouldn't be cut off before it begins. It's like tying one arm behind your back with the research. This must continue. All these scientists believe it must go forward. It is the best possibility.

DOERFLINGER: Another speaker at your conference, Mr. Siegel, Allan Trounson the top stem cell expert in Australia has said cloning is completely unnecessary and its time has past.

HAYS: Sounds like there's a debate here. I think we have viewer who wants to get in on this.

DOERFLINGER: The conference is being held to present only one view. The other views will have to be held in other ways.

HAYS: Richard that's why you're here with us. Thank you.

DOERFLINGER: Thank you.

RAMBERG: We have a caller on the line.

CLARKIN: Ronnie, in Texas. Ronnie, are you there?

CALLER: Yes, I am.

CLARKIN: Go ahead. Welcome to the show.

CALLER: I tend to agree with the gentleman there.

CLARKIN: Which gentleman? Blue background or the gentleman to my side.

CALLER: The gentleman with the glass. Let me put it that way.

HAYS: Who is against this research, right?

CALLER: For the research. I'm sorry. I'm a dialysis patient. I've been on it for 24 years. This is just the beginning of finding out how to clone organs for kidney patients that are on dialysis. Beginnings of -- this is just a start. Stem cells is a start of trying get organs for these kinds of patients.

CLARKIN: Richard, what do you say to that? You have somebody with a medical condition, there's a glimmer of hope, possibly.

DOERFLINGER: Well, you have to decide on your priorities depending on what's really working. Cloning has not worked, has never helped a patient. We don't know that it ever will. There is an animal study in which cloning was used to produce new kidney tissue for a cow. But the way they did that was to clone the embryo and then put it in a womb and grow to it somewhere midway in pregnancy and then abort it for its kidney tissue.

You have to wait for that and do fetal farming, farming unborn children in women's wombs in order to translate that into human beings. Talk about a slippery slope.

We're already moving from embryonic stem cells on to growing children in their mother's wombs in order to abort them for their organs.

SIEGEL: This is cherry picking bits and pieces of research. When you look at the totality, the scientific community wants this research to advance. The patient community wants this research to advance. It's very important.

RAMBERG: We're gonna bring another caller into this discussion. James, in California, go ahead. James? James? We must have lost that call. I have a question for you, Richard. If, in fact, we make this illegal, is there the danger of rogue scientists actually pushing ahead with this kind of research? Would that be even worse for the whole community?

DOERFLINGER: I think the rogue scientists will always be with us. But there's going to be a lot less abuse, a lot less of mistreatment of human life, of women and of children. Women have to be exploited for their eggs to make these embryos, too. It's a whole other ethical issue.

There would be a great deal less of that if the international community makes a decision that this is off the table. Let's pursue therapeutic promise, therapeutic research that everyone can live with and doesn't raise these problems.

HAYS: Bernard, I guess I want to get this down to a very practical level. There's been different proposals. President Bush kind of put the brakes on stem cell research here. In Britain they've opened a stem cell bank, if I'm getting this correct.

In Costa Rica there's a bank. There's a Belgium convention that says lets outlaw this, as you would suggest for reproductive purposes, but for research. Where do you think the weight of this is going? Are you worried that this is going to be stopped dead in its tracks? Or are people like Richard, just whistling in the dark at this point?

SIEGEL: I think eventually the research will advance. I have real concerns especially with what's going on in the United Nations. Because in the U.N., they can draw the line worldwide to ban reproductive cloning. Imagine if we wake up in October when deliberations are taking place again and we read headlines that the United Nations has recommended a ban on therapeutic cloning worldwide. It seems to me that many cultures, many religions would say they want this to advance.

CLARKIN: But how likely is that? What's the likelihood of seeing a worldwide ban?

SIEGEL: Certainly there's the chance that the U.N. could recommend this ban. Who knows if the treaty would ever pass or not. But it would have an impact. It would be like a wet blanket on the research. I'm hoping that the U.N. won't do that.

RAMBERG: We'll go back to the phones. Jim, in West Virginia, welcome to the show.

CALLER: I would just like to ask the gentleman that is against the cloning and stem cell research especially. I have a spinal cord injury. I suffer every day of my life since 1995. And I just wonder how he thinks he has the right to take any hope I have away of having a normal life.

CALLER: I pose that question directly to you. What gives you that right?

DOERFLINGER: I have a friend, Jim Kelly (ph), who is a spinal cord injury patient. He has been suffering for five years. He originally supported the idea of therapeutic cloning. Then he started looking into the science of it. Started looking into the Americans and other researchers that are getting themselves almost fixated on this to the exclusion of other things.

There are limited research funds. People have to choose where to put their priorities. He ended up coming out against it because he thinks its diverting

attention away from the things that can really help patients with spinal cord injuries. There's research -- not just research, clinical trials, successful trials, being done in Portugal by Dr. Carlos Lima (ph).

I don't know if you saw his television program, where patients are beginning to walk again after he treated them with their own adult stem cells. Why did this groundbreaking clinical trial have to be done in Portugal? Why do Americans have to fly to Portugal to get this potentially groundbreaking treatment? Because American researchers have gotten themselves fixated down this avenue that embryo research is going to do it all. They've stuck with that regardless of all the practical obstacles that keep coming up.

RAMBERG: That brings up an interesting question. If there was scientific evidence that you found plausible that said that this actually advanced medicine, would you and your organization be more willing to stop the ban?

DOERFLINGER: No. I think if it was effective, then it raises even broader moral problems. Because then if we're going to be treating millions of patients with these diseases -- that means you need tens of millions maybe hundreds of millions of women's eggs.

That means you need to get a lot of volunteers and probably have to pay them, at least in the United States, to get hyper-ovulated by fertility drugs, raise their risk of ovarian cancer, by the way, from these drugs -- and exploit themselves as egg farms in order to even begin to make this possible. Most of the scientists are saying if this does ever work it will either be massively impractical to do it. Or it will be only available very limited basis to the very rich.

HAYS: I guess that's your final statement there. Bernard Siegel, your final statement?

SIEGEL: This can lead to the understanding, treatment and cures of diseases like Alzheimer's, spinal cord injury, diabetes. If you have a child that's suffering from diabetes or a loved one with Alzheimer's like Nancy Reagan, all this hand wringing, let the science advance. And let's find out if it will work or not. Let's not ban it at the inception.

HAYS: All right. Bernard Sigel, from the Genetics Policy institute. We thank you for joining us. Richard Doerflinger, from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, we thank you both. It's obviously a debate that's going to be going on for some time.

I thank also, our viewers. Thank you for calling, thank you for sharing your experience with us as well.